No Regrets

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Michael Fuller assesses productions of 'Lohengrin' in Zurich and Amsterdam

Lohengrin. Klaus Florian Vogt (Lohengrin), Elza van den Heever (Elsa), Martin Gantner (Friedrich von Telramund), Petra Lang (Ortrud), Christof Fischesser (King Henry), Michael Kraus (Herald); Zurich Opera Chorus, Philharmonia Zurich/Simone Young; Andreas Homoki (director), Wolfgang Gussman (designer), Franck Evin (lighting). Zurich Opera House, 9 October 2014

Lohengrin. Nikolai Schukoff (Lohengrin), Juliane Banse (Elsa), Evgeny Nikitin (Friedrich von Telramund), Michaela Schuster (Ortrud), Günther Groissböck (King Henry), Bastiaan Everink (Herald); Chorus of the Dutch National Opera, Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra/Marc Albrecht; Pierre Audi (director), Jannis Kounellis (designer), Angelo Figus (costumes), Jean Kalman (lighting). Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam, 16 November 2014

Lederhosen and dirndls to the fore in Andreas Homoki's 'homely, bourgeois' production of *Lohengrin* for Zurich Opera. Petra Lang as Ortrud (*left*) and Elza van den Heever (*centre*) as Elsa.
Photo Monika Rittershaus

One could not wish to see two more radically different productions of *Lohengrin* than those staged recently in Zurich and Amsterdam. The former is cosy, domesticated, intimate: the latter stark, monumental, epic.

In Zurich, Andreas Homoki and his team present us with a screen bearing a huge, garish image of two entwined hearts on a landscape, inscribed 'Es gibt ein Glück'. (Significantly, this is only half of Elsa's expression of hope to Ortrud during their scene together in Act II: 'Es gibt ein Glück, das ohne Reu' – 'There can be happiness without regret'. Elsa's tragic fate is thus immediately presaged.) During the Prelude, two scenes are successively lit behind this screen: the first shows Elsa and Gottfried grieving over a coffin (presumably that of their father), while Telramund attempts to offer them comfort; the second shows Elsa being led as a bride towards Telramund, before casting down her bouquet and running away. We are thus provided with both a 'backstory' regarding these characters, and an interesting gloss on the relationship of Elsa and Telramund, although these scenes are of course completely at odds dramatically with what the music is intended to convey at this point, as described later in Lohengrin's Grail Narration. When the screen is raised for Act I we are presented with a warm, wooden interior, furnished with rustic chairs and tables, the rear wall of the stage bearing a smaller, framed version of the 'two hearts' picture. The cast are dressed in traditional costumes: lederhosen for the men, dirndls for the women, apart from Elsa, who wears a simple white shift. At the first sighting of Lohengrin, a small model swan is held aloft and passed from hand to hand among the milling chorus (see front cover): they then part to reveal Lohengrin in a similar white shift, crouched trembling in a foetal position on the ground, in which position he sings 'Nun sei bedankt' (with his back to the audience, thus deadening its impact). Members of the chorus dress him in lederhosen before his duel with Telramund: this is conducted on tables which have been pushed together to define the combat area. Telramund wields a knife: Lohengrin readily disarms him and claims victory.

The beginning of Act II is set among upturned tables in the same set. It is now Telramund and Ortrud who are 'outsiders', and who hence wear simple shifts, until Elsa presents Ortrud with a dress as a sign of their *rapprochement*. Rather than process to the Minster, the ladies attending Elsa set the tables straight and lay them for the wedding supper, with tasteful floral arrangements: at her interruption, Ortrud leaps onto the tables and kicks these into the crowd, taking down the 'two hearts' picture and punching a hole in it. Lohengrin subsequently restores it to its position on the wall. The same set, with scattered tables, is used for the opening scene of Act III: during the change of scene the tables are rearranged into a square. The King's rabble-rousing speech to the men of Brabant clearly takes place in a beer cellar, the men seated around the tables raising their pots of ale in tribute to him – a scene with uncomfortable 20th-century resonances. Lohengrin's departure and Gottfried's entrance are managed in the same way as that of the arrival of the swan knight, Lohengrin's parting words being sung from the wings.

The homely, bourgeois look of this Zurich production contrasts radically with the stark, futuristic tone of that in Amsterdam (first seen in 2002, this was a follow-up to Pierre Audi's celebrated *Ring* cycle there in the 1990s). Here, the Act I set consists of an enormous steel wall, running the full height and breadth of the stage, on which the

chorus (numbering well over 100, like its Zurich counterpart) is seated in four vertical rows. The spectacular 'wall of sound' they are able to produce makes for some thrilling moments, and the wall also serves to throw forward the voices of the principals. Rather bizarrely, the 'swan' is a railway truck piled with oars, some of their blades painted white: sensibly, Lohengrin sings 'Nun sei bedankt' offstage. His costume resembles that of a samurai warrior, and he carries a wooden staff (as does Telramund), so it is with these weapons that they fight their duel. Acts II and III retain the same walls of steel, placed at angles in the former and behind a raised platform in the latter. On this platform, which initially represents Elsa's and Lohengrin's bedroom, stands a black screen festooned with white feathers, a nod at both a feather bed and an (otherwise absent) bird. The screen is raised to the flies as the scene changes in Act III, and the 'swan' descends from the flies at its re-appearance. Steel girders, raised and lowered from the flies in Act II and clustered into arrangements resembling tank-traps in Act III, break up the lines of the stage picture. Well-designed lighting and stylised, flowing costumes prevent these stark sets from appearing too brutalist. (I particularly liked the King's costume: a brown robe akin to a friar's habit, with a gold disc on his forehead representing a crown, and a metre-long steel tube in his hands representing a sceptre.)

This opera will always be problematic for the 21st-century viewer in its callous treatment of Elsa at the end. It was fascinating to compare the conclusions of these two productions, since the more homely of them adopted the more radical approach, and the more stark production the more traditional. In Amsterdam, the final tableau presents the child Gottfried standing atop the central platform, holding Lohengrin's staff, while Elsa and the King (the only other characters remaining on stage) adopt stances of despair and regret. In Zurich, however, the final bars see Ortrud making a move to seize the sword and horn left behind by Lohengrin, only for Elsa to pick them up and brandish them, Gottfried clinging defensively to her as she does so. This heroine has perhaps been strengthened by the tragedy she has experienced, and is now ready to stand up to her enemies and take on herself the task of protecting her father's heritage.

From a musical point of view, the Zurich cast was slightly the better. I am aware that Klaus Florian Vogt tends to polarise opinions, but I found that his pure, Oxbridge-choral-scholar tenor fitted the ethereal, other-worldly role of Lohengrin perfectly, and he sang with strength and beauty of tone throughout. The varying moods of Act III, in particular, were superbly caught; and 'In fernem Land' was exquisitely delivered, the high sustained note at 'Taube' floated perfectly. He was well matched by Elza van den Heever, who fielded a similarly pure, bright tone, although her diction left a little to be desired. No such criticism could be levelled at Petra Lang, whose angry, impassioned Ortrud made the most of this character's outbursts. Martin Gantner's Telramund (a role debut) was no match for her, his pleasant baritone lacking the dark quality demanded by this part. Christof Fischesser was a thoroughly dependable King Henry. By comparison, in Amsterdam Nikolai Schukoff's Lohengrin displayed a bright top and some strong baritonal lower notes, but persistently sang a fraction ahead of the beat and was audibly tiring by the end. Juliane Banse was a warm, mezzo-ish Elsa (who also might have paid more attention to her diction), and Michaela Schuster presented a malevolent, calculating Ortrud – a fascinating alternative 'take' to that of the more fiery and impetuous Lang. Evgeny Nikitin's snarling Telramund put across that character's

anguish and desperation well. Günther Groissböck's King Henry was beautifully sung, but perhaps lacked the final ounce of vocal heft.

Both choruses acquitted themselves well, although that in Amsterdam had the edge, and was better served by the set and choreography: movement on the wooden set in Zurich was often accompanied by much clumping of feet. Simone Young drew a performance of great refinement from the Zurich orchestra, with an excellent control of dynamics (although this was at the expense of some occasional sour intonation from the strings in quiet passages). Her offstage forces, playing behind the stage and from a box in the auditorium, were well marshalled. In Amsterdam, Marc Albrecht conjured up some of the finest playing I have ever heard from an orchestra in this opera, beautifully balancing smooth string tones and warm brass, and also drawing out some exquisite playing from the clarinets in the opening scenes of Act II. He, too, made superb use of offstage forces: barely audible brass behind the stage, with trumpets stationed at multiple points around the auditorium, at stalls and circle levels, creating a thrilling, all-encompassing sound-scape for the scene change in Act III.

For all the remarkable musicianship and stagecraft displayed in these two performances, it is a testimony to Wagner's dramaturgical vision that neither can be said to be the last word on the quirky yet stirring work that is *Lohengrin*.